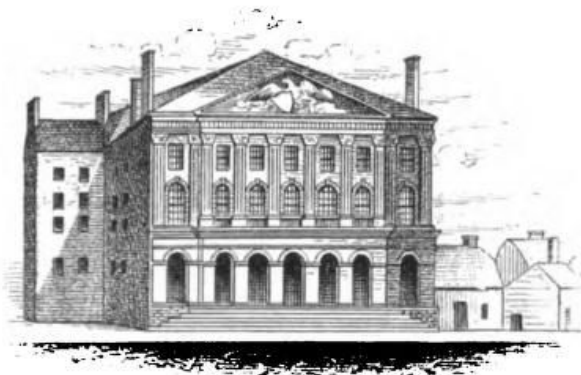


THE
EARLY



DAYS
OF

THE FIRST BOWERY THEATRE, NEW YORK.

THE AMERICAN STAGE.

WILLIAM DUNLAP in his "History of the American Theatre," puts 1752 as the earliest date at which the first play was performed in America by a regular company of comedians. The piece in question was "The Merchant of Venice," and the place selected for this experiment by Lewis Hallam, manager of the English adventurers, was Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia. It has, however, been proved by other writers and notably by Colonel T. Allston Brown, whose "History of the New York Theatres"* is to be published shortly, that English companies came to this country to give performances as early as twenty years before the date fixed by Mr. Dunlap. It may, however, be conceded, that these were only isolated and unimportant experiments, and that the company organized and brought over here by Lewis Hallam formed the real foundation stone of the American stage.

The circumstances under which this enterprise was entered upon by the Hallams is interesting. In the year 1750, William Hallam, then manager of Goodman's Fields Theatre, London, failed. His debts were trifling, and

his creditors, as a mark of their esteem, left him in possession of his theatrical wardrobe and sufficient capital to start anew in life. He then turned his attention to America and conceived the plan of sending over here a company of players. He confided his scheme to his brother Lewis and the latter consented to cross the Atlantic. The next step was to find a company and to induce them to enlist in this theatrical forlorn hope. It was not an easy task, for, in those days, the idea the average Englishman had of the American colonies was extremely vague, and all sorts of dangers—bloodthirsty redskins and ferocious animals—were feared. Finally, a good company was recruited and the repertoire was prepared and rehearsed, including: "The Merchant of Venice," "The Fair Penitent," "The 'Beaux' Strategem," "Jane Shore," "The Recruiting Officer," "Richard III," "The Careless Husband," "The Constant Couple," "Hamlet," "Othello," "Theodosius," "Provoked Husband," etc., etc., twenty pieces altogether and, at that time, favorite plays on the London boards.

Lewis Hallam was appointed manager and the brothers were to divide profits equally. The organization assumed the corporate title of The American Company. The principal actors were at first partners in the en-

* Colonel T. Allston Brown, to whom the writer is indebted for many of the illustrations and much of the information embodied in this article, has been preparing such a work for many years. When published it will unquestionably prove a most important addition to theatrical literature.

terprise, but, in time, this system underwent a change and the actors were engaged on weekly salaries as at present.

The little band of actors sailed from England in May, 1752, and after a six-weeks' voyage landed safely at Yorktown, Virginia. All the way over the Atlantic they had rehearsed their plays, so that they were ready for immediate action upon landing.

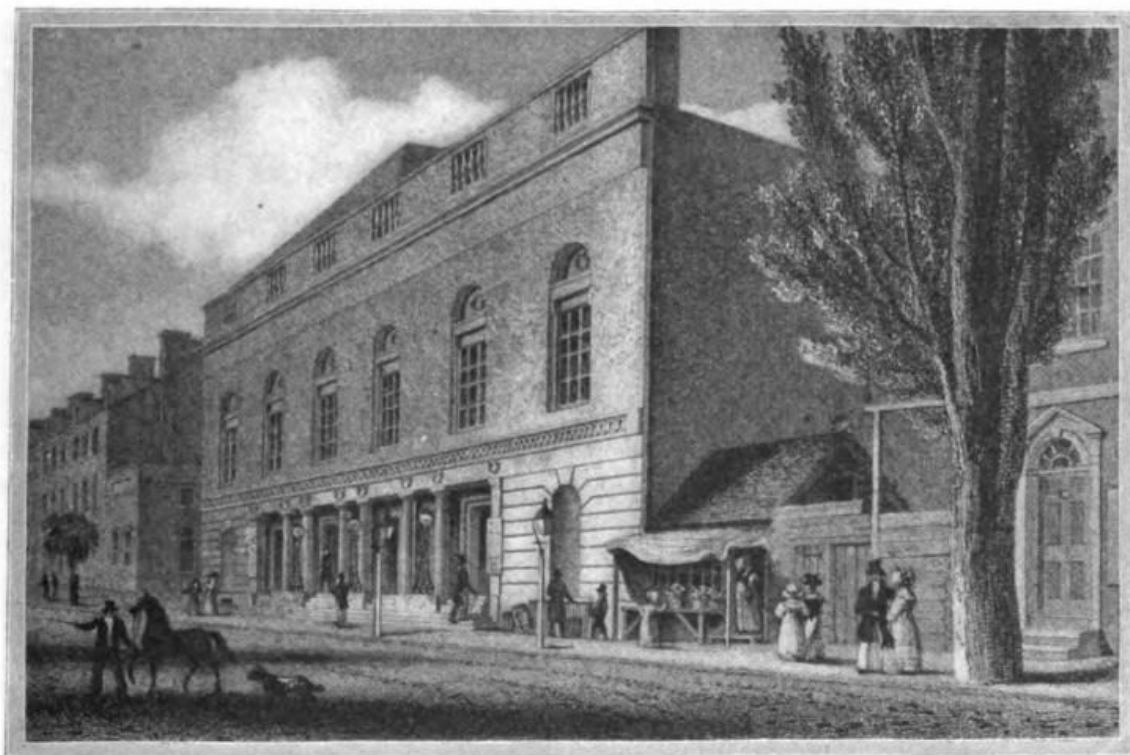
Hallam applied for and was granted permission to erect a theatre, and having found a suitable building, he proceeded to alter it to his purpose. It was a large house in the suburbs and had been doubtless erected for a storehouse by the early emigrants. This, according to historian Dunlap, was the first theatre opened in America by a company of regular comedians, and although within the boundaries of the metropolis of the Ancient Dominion, the seat of William and Mary College, and the residence of all the officers of his majesty's government, was so near the woods that the manager could

stand within the door and shoot pigeons for his dinner, which he more than once actually did.

"The Merchant of Venice" was presented on September 5, 1752, and followed by a farce entitled "Lethe."

Exactly how long this company stayed at Williamsburg, or the exact date of their departure thence, is not known. However, they carried with them a certificate signed by Governor Dinwiddie recommending them as comedians and testifying to the propriety of their behavior as men.

A writer in the *Maryland Gazette* under date of June 19, 1828, claims for Annapolis the honor of having opened the first theatre in the United States. He writes: "In the year 1752 the theatre, then called the new theatre, was a neat building, tastefully arranged and competent to contain between five and six hundred persons. It was built upon ground which had been leased from the Protestant Episcopal Church in this city. When the lease, about ten or twelve years ago, had expired,



THE WALNUT STREET THEATRE, PHILADELPHIA.

Erected in 1808, and still standing, and in use as a theatre.

the church took possession of the theatre. It was not sold. It was pulled down merely to procure the materials of which it was built. Scarcely a fragment of it now remains. It was the oldest theatre in the United States, and the earliest temple reared in our country to the Dramatic Muse. Perhaps it was the first spot upon which the characters of Shakespeare were exhibited to the people of the Western world."

It is more than probable that it was the Hallam company which performed at the opening of this theatre on July 13, 1752, as, by that date, the company had left Williamsburg and from then until they reached New York their movements are unrecorded.

The earliest record we have of a play house in New York City was a theatre in Nassau Street, near John Street, erected on the spot for a long time occupied by the old Dutch Church. This was opened by the Hallams on September 17, 1753, exactly one year after their first appearance at Williamsburg. The bill they presented on the first night has, to-day, historical as well as bibliographical value and as a literary curiosity it is reproduced herewith:

The days of performances were Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; and so continued for half a century. Towards the middle of October the prices were reduced.

The theatre in Nassau Street was closed March 18, 1754, with "The Beggars' Opera" and "Devil to Pay," when the following notice appeared: "Lewis Hallam, comedian, intending for Philadelphia, begs the favour of those that have any demands upon him to bring in their accounts and receive their money." Poor Hallam, he would hardly have to go to that trouble to-day.

Although Philadelphia, in those days, was the stronghold of Quakerism, a large number of the inhabitants were liberal minded and envied New York its secular pleasures. Many had been lovers of the theatre in England and longed to see once more representations of their favorite dramatists. These people wrote to Hallam, inviting him to the Quaker City and exerted their influence to secure the necessary permission from the authorities. Governor Hamilton was disposed to grant the permission, but the Quakers were loud in their demands for the prohibition of

BY HIS EXCELLENCY'S AUTHORITY.

By a Company of Comedians from London, at the New Theatre in Nassau Street, the present evening, being the 17th of September, (1753) will be presented a comedy called

THE CONSCIOUS LOVERS.

The part of Tony Bevil to be performed	by Mr. Rigby.
" " " Mr. Sealand " " "	by Mr. Malone.
Sir John Bevil	by Mr. Bell.
Myrtle	by Mr. Clarkson.
Climberton	by Mr. Miller.
Humphrey	by Mr. Adcock.
Daniel	by Master L. Hallam.
The part of Tom to be performed	by Mr. Singleton.
" " " Phillis " " "	by Mrs. Beceley.
Mrs. Sealand	by Mrs. Clarkson.
Lucinda	by Mrs. Hallam.
Isabella	by Mrs. Rigby.
And the part of Indiana to be performed	by Mrs. Hallam.

To which will be added the Ballad Farce called

DAMON AND PHILLIDA.

A new occasional prologue to be spoken by Mrs. Rigby.

An epilogue (addressed to the ladies) by Mrs. Hallam.

PRICES, box 8s., pit 6s., gallery 3s. No person whatever to be admitted behind the scenes. N. B., Gentlemen and ladies that choose tickets may have them at the new printing office in Beaver Street. To begin at 6 o'clock.

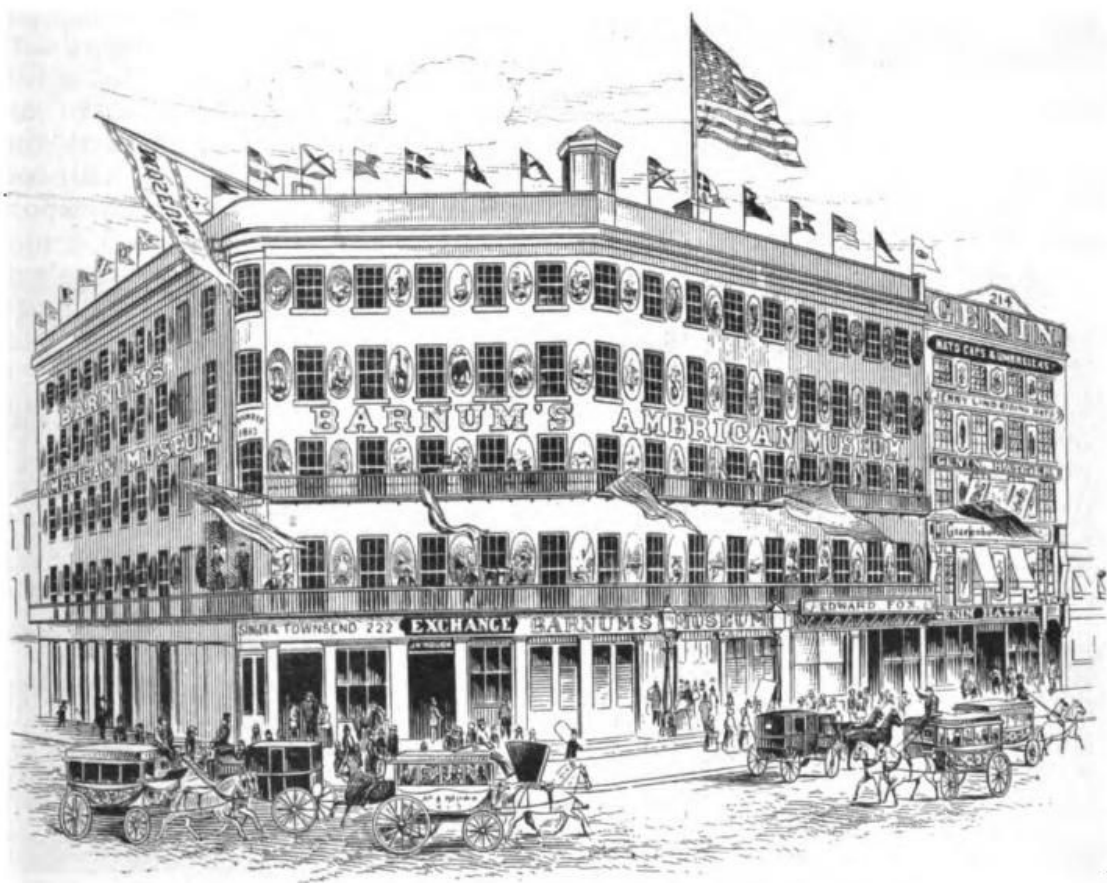
"profane stage-plays." Counter petitions were circulated and finally the Hallams won, securing permission to open a theatre and perform twenty-four plays on condition that they "offered nothing indecent and immoral." The manager was further required to give security for all debts contracted and all contracts entered into by the company. It is to be regretted that the authorities are not so exacting at the present time; then we should hear fewer cases of actors being left destitute by irresponsible managers.

The first theatre in Philadelphia was in the storehouse of William Plumstead, at the corner of the first alley above Pine Street. The place has since been occupied as a sail loft, and may have been torn down ere this, but the remains or traces of scenic deco-

ration were to be seen within forty years.

Notwithstanding violent and persistent opposition the company made money and gained reputation. Pamphlets were published and distributed gratis during the whole theatrical campaign and every effort was made to show the evils attendant upon plays and players and play houses; but the dramatists and their interpreters won.

"The Fair Penitent," and "Miss in Her Teens" were the first plays presented to the citizens of Philadelphia. The house was overflowing. During the course of the performance there was much excitement caused by the discovery of one of the unfriendly petitioners in the pit. He was accused of spying and peace was not restored till he was ejected. A few months later the company left for the West



BARNUM'S MUSEUM, NEW YORK.

Variety performances were given here, as well as circus exhibitions. It was in the height of its glory during the war.



THE OLD BOWERY THEATRE, NEW YORK,
AS IT APPEARED IN 1860.
It is now known as the Thalia.

Indies where Lewis Hallam died and shortly afterwards his widow married David Douglass, who became the theatrical king in this hemisphere.

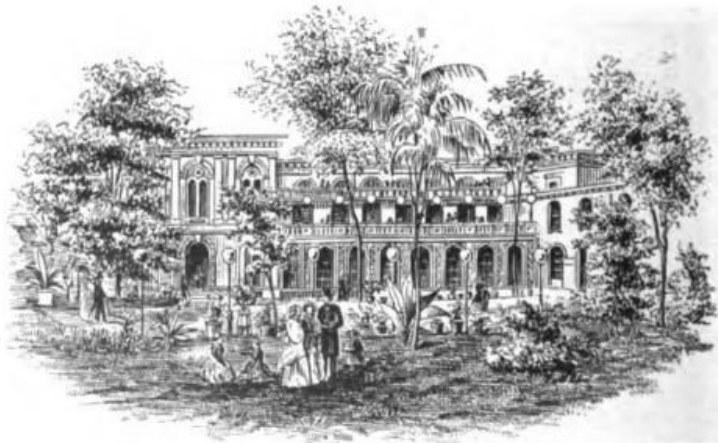
During the absence of the actors in the West Indies, the Nassau Street Theatre, New York, was taken down and Douglass secured another building situated on Conger's wharf, between what are now called Old Slip and Coffeehouse Slip. Douglass had built his theatre without obtaining permission from the magistracy to enact plays, and when the company returned and authorization was asked, it was promptly refused. Douglass became humble and figuratively went down on

his knees to secure the permission which was eventually granted. Thus the second theatre in New York was opened with "Jane Shore."

In 1759 Douglass also opened the second theatre in Philadelphia. It was situated at the southwest corner of Vernon and South Streets, at a place formerly called Society Hill.

This house was not a theatre in name only, but was erected for the purpose. Its opening was the signal for a renewal of the Quakers' opposition, and Judge Allen was besieged with petitions to eject "these disturbers of the public morals." The Judge gave the Quakers a characteristic answer. He told them he had "learned more moral virtue from plays than from sermons." A few weeks later the Judge's wife died and the Quakers pointed to her death as an awful warning.

In the beginning of August, 1761, Douglass opened the third theatre erected in New York, situated a little below the junction of Nassau and Beekman Streets. About that time the old Hallam Company had been giving performances at Newport, Rhode Island, where they left a most favorable impression among the slave-dealers of that now fashionable resort. It is a curious fact that at that time, so disreputable was the condition of the actor regarded by gentlefolk, the Hallam company took pains



INTERIOR OF NIBLO'S GARDEN.
A popular resort in the 50's.

wherever they appeared to secure a written testimonial of good behavior, which they used as an advance advertisement in the town to be visited next.

Notwithstanding the good reputation enjoyed by the Hallam company, they still met with the most strenuous opposition even in New York. Permission to act was given for two months only. They only performed twice a week. The house held about 450. The average receipts were \$300, which, in sixteen nights, gave \$4,800. The total current expenses were \$625 and the cost of the theatre was \$1,625. The scenery and wardrobe cost \$1,000. So, altogether, the money expended was \$3,150, thus leaving a balance of \$1,550 to pay their individual expenses.

The third New York theatre was

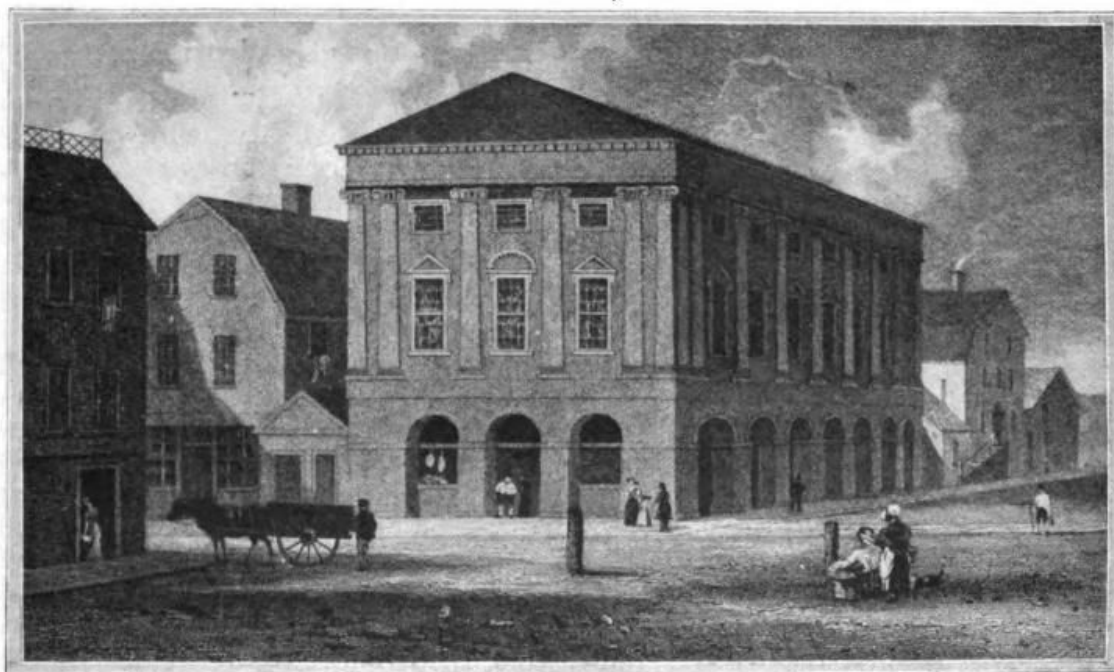


TREMONT THEATRE, BOSTON.

demolished by the rioters during the historical stamp-act riots in 1764, and in 1767 the theatre in John Street was erected. It was built chiefly of wood, was painted red, and was about sixty feet back from the street, having a covered way of rough wooden material from the pavement to the doors. The house was opened on Dec. 7, 1767, with "The

Beaux' Strategem." By this time many of the members of the original company had died or disappeared and had been replaced by other actors from England.

A curious custom in vogue at that time is thus mentioned on a programme of the John Street Theatre: "Ladies will please send their servants to keep their places at four o'clock." The performance began at six, so for two hours and longer the front seats of the boxes were occupied



THEATRE AT NEWPORT.

From a print published in 1831.



THE FIRST CHESTNUT STREET
THEATRE, PHILADELPHIA.

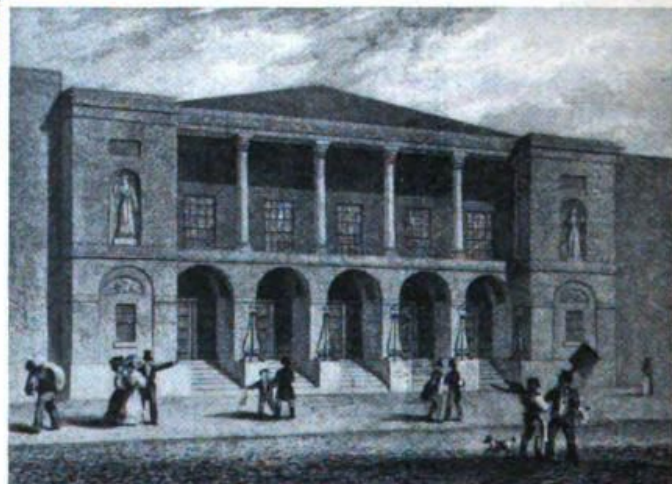
Built in 1792, destroyed by fire April
2, 1820.

by negroes and negresses of every age, waiting for their masters and mistresses.

A few evenings after the opening of the John Street Theatre, nine chiefs of the Cherokee nation visited the theatre to witness "Richard III," and a newspaper of the time chronicles the fact that "they regarded the play with attention, but seemed to express nothing but surprise." Shortly after, the chiefs executed a war dance on the same stage in return for the hospitality previously shown them.

The first play ever seen in Albany, "Venice Preserved," was performed on July 3, 1769, when the actors obtained permission from the Governor "for one month only." The company had no theatre and were compelled to act in the hospital.

In 1774 the first theatre was built in Charleston, S. C., and Douglass, having been invited by the inhabi-

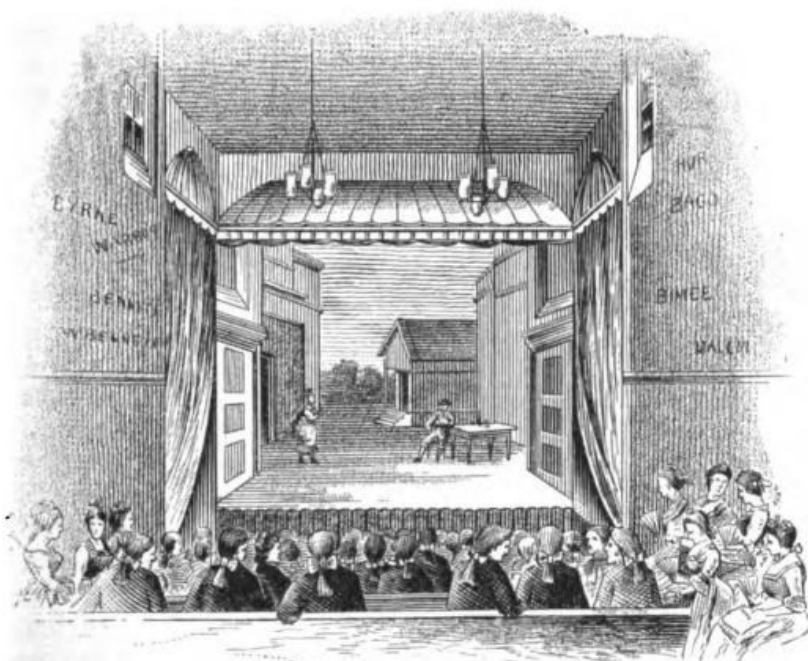


THE CHESTNUT STREET THEATRE, PHILADELPHIA.

Opened December 2, 1822.

tants, performed there with his company for fifty-one consecutive nights. On their return to New York they found the authorities opposed to further performances. The colonies were then about to take up arms against the mother country and, deeming that performances by English players from Royal Theatres might prejudice the cause of the revolutionists, all public amusements were suspended. The actors embarked at once for the West Indies and stayed there until after the Declaration of Independence.

After the capture of New York by the British forces the actors of the Douglass company were succeeded by the English officers who during the



INTERIOR OF THE OLD JOHN STREET THEATRE, NEW YORK.

entire length of the English occupation, wrote and produced plays—mostly pieces ridiculing the Yankees—and acted them in the then existing play-houses. When the British entered Philadelphia the theatre in Southwark was opened by the soldier-Thespians and it is known as an historical fact, that Major André was one of the scene painters during their regime. He painted a drop curtain which lasted as long as the house.

The Hallams returned to America on the close of the war, but they were coldly received and for a long time the question of the desirability of prohibiting stage performances altogether was seriously discussed by the authorities. In the Legislature of Pennsylvania a Doctor Logan declared that theatres were only fit for monarchies. A Mr. Smiley thought that by drawing the minds of the people to amusements, they were led to forget their political duties. He avowed

himself "no friend to the fine arts" and declared they only flourished when states were on the decline. Finally, however, common sense prevailed and the clause which prohibited the drama as being a source of vice and immorality was rejected.

The Hallams resumed operations in New York, and the first play performed in the United States under the new star spangled banner was "The Countess of Salisbury." But misfortune followed.

The local magnates frowned on the theatre as a source of extravagance. "While so great a part of the city still lies in ruins," ran the official indictment, "and many of the citizens continue to be pressed with the distress brought on them in consequence of the late war, there is a loud call for industry and economy; and it would in a particular manner be unjustifiable in this corporation to



NEW YORK THEATRE, AFTERWARD BOWERY.

Erected 1826. From the collection of Thos. J. McKee.

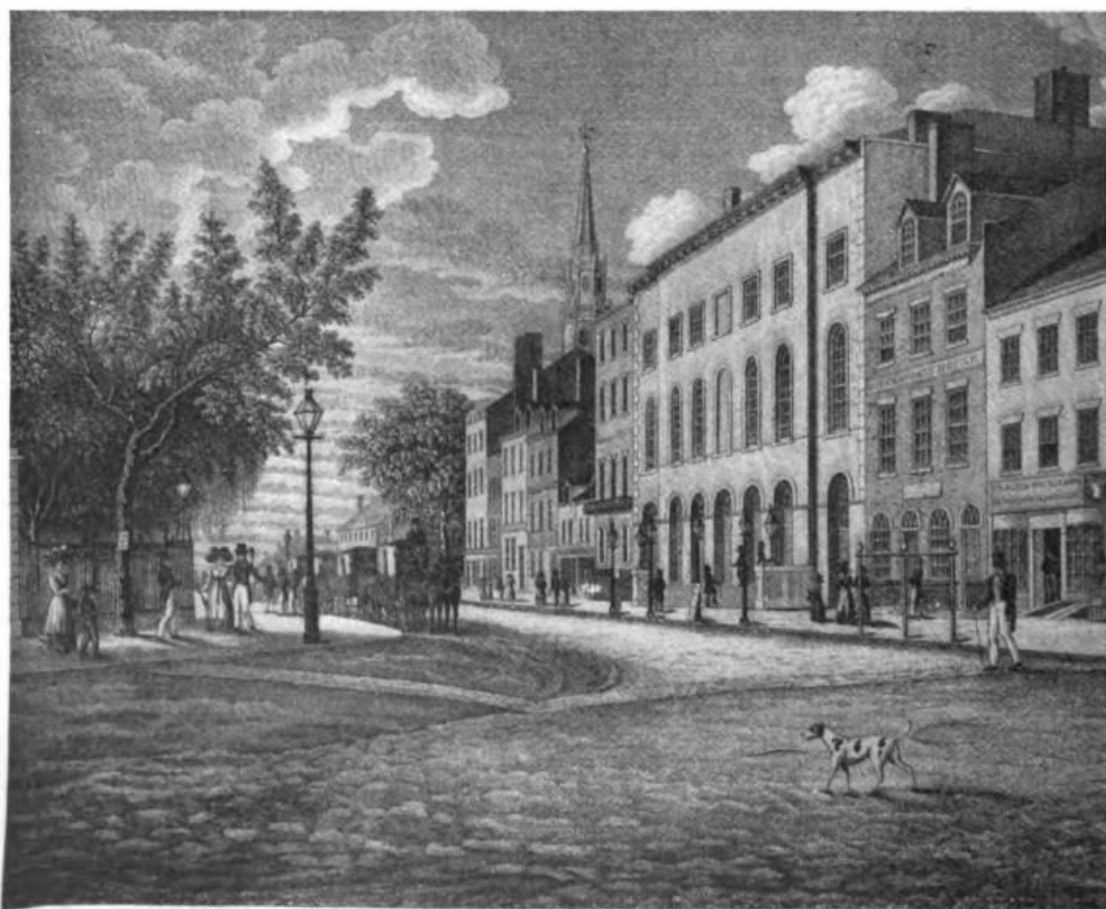
countenance enticing and expensive amusements." But, before long, matters were straightened out, and on Jan. 16, 1786, Lewis Hallam made his first appearance as *Hamlet*. This was the first time the play had ever been seen in America. Sheridan's "School for Scandal" was also performed for the first time during the same year.

From New York Hallam and Henry went with their company to Baltimore where they opened a new theatre on Aug. 16, 1786. Philadelphia does not appear to have been in favor with the actors at that time, for on leaving Baltimore they avoided the Quaker city and returned to the John Street Theatre, New York.

About 1792 Thomas Wignell, an actor of the Hallam company, had seceded from that organization and gone to recruit another company in England. On his return he suc-

ceeded in interesting capital which built the Chestnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia, and he opened it two years later. It was destroyed in 1820 by fire.

For a long time, and prior to 1792, Boston was a forbidden city to the Thespian, but finally the more enlightened bean-eaters succeeded in repealing the local laws against the theatre and several managers—including members of the Hallam and Wignell companies—joined forces and gave performances there, and, thanks to the enterprise of some of the wealthiest citizens, a theatre "in everything but the name" was erected. But for a long time the players were subjected to the greatest persecution from the authorities, and theatricals languished in Boston for that reason. In the spring of 1796, however, public subscriptions for the erection of a



VIEW OF PARK ROW, NEW YORK, IN 1830, SHOWING THE SECOND PARK THEATRE.

fine theatre were opened in that city and the following year the Haymarket, an immense wooden pile, was opened.

Two new theatres had by this time—1797—been built and opened in New York, the Greenwich

Street Theatre, and the Park Theatre. The John Street Theatre was then in its decay.

The drama had now secured a firm foothold on American soil. New and distinguished actors arrived continually from England, and the American



LAFAYETTE THEATRE, NEW YORK, IN 1825.

At Laurens Street, near Canal.

public began to patronize the play-house generously. From then down to the present time the interest has gone steadily on, ever on the increase. The detailed history of the American stage during the last half century

would be a remarkably interesting one to relate, describing as it would the triumphs of the great actors—foreign and native—who have trod the boards, the playhouses of historic interest long since disappeared, and plays that have entertained three generations.

Arthur Hornblow.

WINTER.

WHEN Autumn dies at last upon her throne
 Amid the ruin of a regal state,
 Boreas' clarion trumpets sound her fate,
 And Winter knows the realm thenceforth his own;
 Calling his minions in the Arctic zone
 And making them through his own greatness great,
 He journeys forth to his possessions straight,
 The winds' wild music aye before him blown.
 A lock of frost he fastens on the land,
 And makes the air with keenest cold to sting;
 The waters lie 'neath fetters from his hand;
 And while his white snows toss and whirl and fling,
 Robed royally and crowned for all command
 He proudly cries, "Behold me: I am King!"

William Francis Barnard.